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Cutting Through Tradition: A Feminist Analysis of Female Genital Mutilation in Possessing the Secret of Joy

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Abstract: “Female genital mutilation targets little girls, baby girls-fragile angels who are helpless, who cannot fight back. It’s a crime against a child, a crime against humanity. It’s abuse. It’s absolutely criminal and we have to stop it.”- Waris Dirie (Somali model, author and human rights activist) Pulitzer Prize winning Afro-American author Alice Walker's novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is a powerful exploration of the complex and often fraught relationships between culture, identity, and the female body. At the heart of the novel is the practice of genital mutilation, a brutal and ancient ritual that has been inflicted upon millions of women and girls worldwide. Through the character of Tashi, a young African woman who undergoes genital mutilation as a child, Walker sheds light on the devastating physical and emotional consequences of this practice, as well as its deep roots in patriarchal cultures and societies.

This paper will provide a feminist analysis of genital mutilation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, examining the ways in which Walker's novel challenges dominant discourses around this practice and highlights the need for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of the complex power dynamics at play. By exploring the intersections of culture, identity, and the female body, this paper will demonstrate how *Possessing the Secret of Joy* offers a powerful critique of the politics of pain and the ways in which women's bodies are controlled, regulated, and brutalized.

Keywords: Female genital mutilation (FGM), Circumcision, Afro-American, Sexism, Racism, Popular Literature, Discrimination, Awareness, Social Justice, Politics of pain.

Introduction: Before diving deep in to the depth of my article it is essential here to introduce you with the heinous sexist practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a pervasive and harmful traditional practice that involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons, affecting over 230 million girls and women worldwide, primarily in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This practice is widely recognized as a gross violation of human rights and a form of violence against women and girls, perpetuating deep-rooted inequality and discrimination.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines FGM as "all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" ¹. This practice has no health benefits and can lead to severe physical and psychological complications, including bleeding, urinary problems, cysts, menstrual difficulties,

infections, childbirth complications, and increased risk of new-born deaths ¹. Now let me draw your attention towards some horrific data provided by World Health Organization as of 2024, a staggering 4.4 million girls, equivalent to over 12,000 daily, remain at risk of undergoing FGM globally. Despite notable advancements in recent years, FGM persists as a pressing concern in numerous countries, underscoring the need for sustained and intensified efforts to combat this harmful practice. According to available data, only seven out of 31 countries are currently on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) target of eliminating genital mutilation by 2030.

Main Text: In order to draw the attention of whole world towards this crime, February 6th has been declared the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a pivotal occasion for the global community to reaffirm its commitment to eradicating this detrimental practice. This day serves as a catalyst for collective action, fostering strengthened partnerships and concerted efforts to eliminate FGM, which continues to have a profound impact on the lives of millions of women and girls worldwide. António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations said in his remarkable speech regarding FGM “Let’s join forces to make female genital mutilation history and ensure a brighter, healthier, and more just future for all women and girls everywhere.” (Web)

In addition to implementing the law, the Envoy on Youth also called on all countries and stakeholders to address any existing gaps in their legal frameworks and reiterated the support from the UN in overcoming the harmful practice. Jayathma Wickramanayake, the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, remarked about FGM, while speaking at an international forum in the Gambia on strategies to combat the practice, “This is not acceptable and this is done in the name of tradition, culture, religion or in the name of ensuring that women are to take on subservient roles to the men they will eventually marry. History has taught us that human societies can come up with reprehensible social practices – that are justified under false guises – to strengthen the power structures or maintain the status quo for certain groups in society. This is not acceptable in the 21st century.” (Web)

This terrible practice of FGM extends beyond the confines of Africa and tribal societies. In India, particularly in Mumbai, young girls as young as six and seven are subjected to this brutal practice, perpetuated by untrained midwives within the Bohra community. For an extended period, FGM, referred to as "khatna" by the Bohras, remained a clandestine and taboo topic, shrouded in secrecy and silence. However, a growing number of women, who have themselves been victimized by this Bohra tradition, are now opting to speak out and raise awareness about the issue. Masooma Ranalvi, a Delhi-based publisher, has taken a pioneering step by appending her name to an online petition against FGM, alongside 17 other women. This collective effort marks a significant shift in the discourse surrounding FGM, as these women, driven by their personal experiences of pain and trauma, have become impassioned advocates for change, seeking to protect future generations of girls from undergoing this harmful practice. Aarefa Johari, a courageous young journalist, is a survivor of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), having undergone the procedure in her childhood. She has since become a vocal advocate against this inhumane practice. Aarefa's experience is eerily similar to that of Masooma, as both were subjected to FGM due to familial pressure exerted by older female relatives, including aunts and mothers-in-law.

Now through this research paper let us explore the power of popular literature in raising awareness about FGM, with a specific focus on Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* provides a feminist analysis of genital mutilation, highlighting the ways in which this practice is rooted in patriarchal cultures and societies and perpetuates the oppression of women. It is about an African tribal woman whose life as an immigrant to United States is haunted by the trauma of her genital mutilation. Like her all-other novels, here also walker

reflects various aspects of racism and sexism. The chief victim Tashi; an African woman of fictional Olinkan tribe chooses to undergo female circumcision (female genital mutilation); a taboo made by male dominated society for their women. Here, Walker minutely examines the hellish and destructive effects of this ritual on the body and soul of Tashi and in wide sense on all women. It depicts the horrific physical and mental consequences of this heinous ritual. It shows us the way that women emotionally deadened, locking up a weeping child inside their hearts, because it is the only way of their survival. Celie's daughter-in-law, the African woman Tashi, also the protagonist of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, has to endure cultural violence to achieve a deeper bond with her African roots. She becomes a victim of her people's ceremonies, a rite that years earlier had left her sister dead in a pool of blood. The ritual female circumcision and facial scarring are practices which leave African women joyless and spiritually dead as they struggle "to reconcile the two warring cultural consciousness" (Ray 63).

Initially Tashi chooses this ritual to make her destiny. But in reality, she has no free or informed choice. She does it to fit in, to stop the teasing of other women, to become a proper woman herself, to honor the traditions of her people and her culture, to mark herself out as distinctly Olinkan and to give herself the chance of becoming a wife. She believes that it will improve her a lot in life. She is not aware about the far-reaching, terrible consequences of this honor. In reality there was no choice- all was inevitable, all was arranged and Tashi herself had little to do but to follow the tracks laid down to her by others. Beside circumcision there is the other much more dangerous practice – genital infibulations. While circumcision concerns the clitoris, with infibulation not only the clitoris is removed but the small lips-the labia-are cut off and the big, outer labia as well what is left is closed up, using thrones and whatever they can find. They leave just a small orifice, through which the menstrual blood can flow. But frequently this orifice cannot let out everything. So, a mixture of blood develops inside the vagina. As a consequence, a painful infection develops, which can cause sterility. But that is not all. The woman had been cut and traumatized, so intercourse is very painful and there are a lot of problems regarding to pregnancy and childbirth.

The psyche of Tashi is so much distorted by this ritual of female circumcision that she even can't see a razor; that to her was always associated with men, with beards and with barber stools. And that's why she feels a kind of fear in using this symbolic instrument (of the helplessness of women before the men made ritual) even to save her legs. Tashi had to suffer a lot because of this ritual. Her sexual life with Adam was totally affected. It was full of pain, bleeding and tears rather than pleasure and smiles. As says Tashi; "Each time he touched me, I bled. Each time he moved against me, I winced. There was nothing he could do to me that did not hurt." (61) Walker touches the pain and suffering of Tashi after going through this oppressive Olinkan ritual or after having a stamp of Olinka origin, as the narrator explains;

It now took a quarter of an hour for her to pee. Her menstrual periods lasted ten days. She was incapacitated by the cramps: cramps caused by the near impossibility of flow passing through so tiny an aperture as M'Lissa had left, after fastening together the raw sides of Tashi's vagina with a couple of thorns and inserting a straw so that in healing, the traumatized flesh might not grow together, shutting the opening completely; cramps caused by the residual flow that could not find its way out, was not reabsorbed in to her body, and had nowhere to go. There was the odor, too of soured blood, which no amount of scrubbing, until we got to America, ever washed off. (65)

Tashi suffers severe pain during sex and during menstruation, and perhaps most of all during the birth of her son, Benny. Although she has all the advantages of Western medicine at her disposal, she is made to feel like a freak by the doctors at the American hospital where she gives birth. They

study her mutilation with impersonal fascination. Benny is also slightly retarded as a result of his difficult birth. Later when Tashi (Evelyn in the U.S.) becomes pregnant again, she has an abortion rather than suffer through the humiliation of childbirth. The abortionist suggests she have her second child by Caesarean section, but she cannot bear the thought of being held down and cut open, as it is too close to her traumatic mutilation experience. For being incapable to do anything and to fight, Tashi slips into madness. In America she was despised for her tribal marks. Everybody was shocked at her classical Olinka Walk because of these scares on her thighs. For these American people she was not looking a normal human being like them. Her face was full of scares and looks horrible. To save herself from the humiliation of these strangers *“she had taken to spending half the month completely hidden from human contact, virtually buried.”* (6) To Tashi, the revelation that how much unholy and useless women were considered without going through the ritual of genital mutilation, comes as a terrible shock: and she expresses her deep grief; ***“I saw the healthy green leaves of my America seared to the ground. Her sparkling rivers muddy with blood.”*** (185)

After years of Jungian psychoanalysis treatment, Tashi begins to come to terms with the madness brought on by her mutilation. She learns, much to her horror, that female genital mutilation came to Africa with excised and infibulated enslaved African women, and that it was used on white women. She is told that how American doctors learned to do this ‘procedure’ on other enslaved women and how, ***“they did this on the name of Science...They found a use of it on white women...They wrote in their medical journals that they’d finally found a cure for the white women’s hysteria”***. (188) Hellish experience of Tashi makes her incapable to forget, her favorite sister Dura’s screams who bled to death during the ritual, without even having the right to voice her agony, since the dictum determines, *“You must not cry!”*(p. 24) Tashi’s psychological tension along with her failure to forget her dear younger sister Dura’s scream and death, lead her to the point of murdering M’Lissa, the aged circumciser of the Olinka village. M’Lissa reveals the long-lasting harm caused by female genital mutilation, sharing her own experiences and those of others, like Tashi, who suffered greatly. She highlights the collective guilt, including her own mother’s involvement as a circumciser. A symbolic doll, hidden in a tree, represents a woman’s empowerment and pleasure, contrasting with the trauma inflicted by the practice.

Transforming her individual act and need of embarrassing her repressed womanhood in to ritual itself, the mother circumcised M’Lissa lightly to maintain her daughter’s right to enjoy sex, but to no avail. Noticed by other women who took over, M’Lissa’s circumcision was finalized in a great pain. Yet, even though M’Lissa herself is as much a victim of the ritual as Tashi and Dura are, she still believes in its validity, convinced that it is performed, *“In service to tradition, to what makes us a people. In service to the country and what makes us who we are”* (226). M’Lissa’s cold blooded response to Tashi’s account of her hiding near the hut where Dura was taken to be circumcised and hearing her sister’s scream, as she latter, infected, lay dying - *“If Dura is not bathed...no one will marry her”* (257)-. causes Tashi’s loss of self –control, however and make her commit the murder.

Behind M’Lissa’s fame and national recognition as a survivor of African culture, are the tears of someone who seems to possess the secret of joy. M’Lissa is conscious of the sexist patriarchal system they live in, and criticizes it in her conversation with Tashi. Her deep-rooted disagreement and the agony of what she does make our hearts melt for her. Undoubtedly by her exposure of this long-suppressed hatred for this hellish ritual, the determination of Tashi to murder M’Lissa was delayed but not avoided and with this murder, she brings about her own death, as that is her sentence after the trial. After murdering M’Lissa the struggle and execution of Tashi is also mythical and creates fables for coming strugglers, in the sense that her act of resistance to the tradition that stifles her wholeness, creates the true freedom of herself. Tashi dies in peace, with no M’Lissa left behind to kill another Dura *“screaming her terror eternally into own ear”* (166). Tashi’s sacrifice is not only a spiritual transcendence of the lifelong pain she endures, but also a forceful act of claiming the right to inherit the dignity and self-empowerment of the early African women. This fable of

Tashi's life basically is an attempt to capture the ancient African women's life as the unvoiced resistance to the destruction of female self-hood, an act that demands courage. In her death, Tashi reconciles to the ancient African women's vision of freedom and adds a new fable in the brave history of black women.

There is a parallelism between M'Lissa and Tashi and both possess their secrets of joy and have their different ways to celebrate themselves. This celebration can be observed in their deaths when they achieve a kind of Metaphysical salvation, one because, she is liberated from her emotional burden of silence and the other because, her choice gives her a sense of identity, she did not have before, for from saying, "*I am nobody*" (275) Tashi moves on to the reaffirmation of the self-exact before her signing a letter she writes, "*Tashi Evelyn Johnson Reborn soon to be Deceased.*" (279) Yet what differentiates the two is the fact that one remains silent to the outer world and seems to be happy with her situation, condoning the sexist action of which she is a victim, while the other decides to speak out against misogyny and oppression and who knows that "*If you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those, who will claim you enjoyed it.*" (108)

Tashi's journey from powerlessness to empowerment can be seen with the study of six personas created by Walker: initially Tashi, comes before us as a troubled African child who submits to the tribal rites of scarification and circumcision and upon whom silence is imposed; after this there is evenly, the scarred adult Tashi who becomes an American citizen; Tashi-Evelyn, the African. American whose cultural duality is dominated by the nightmares, remembrance of her African past; Evelyn- Tashi, the Americanized African whose cultural selves coalesce into a picture of herself as a wounded American and Tashi Evelyn-Mrs. Johnson, the ageing matriarchal composite of selves who confesses to kill M'Lissa, the mutilator and a struggler who reconciles herself with Listette, Adam's mistress, and Pierce Lisettie's son by Adam. And finally, there is Tashi Evelyn Johnson's soul, who achieves the self upon her reconciliation of opposites, resistance to lies, and acceptance of death for her "crime" of altering other women to her conviction that resistance to lies composed through silence upon suffering women in a patriarchal social order is the real secret of joy. Through the character of Tashi and her empowerment, Walker gives a message that black people can survive anything, including all their sufferings, because they possess the secret of joy.

Thus, real empowerment of Tashi is depicted in her execution, where we find the secret of joy, empowerment and celebration, black people possess. Throughout her life Tashi lived a fearful life but in her death Tashi is free from every kind of fear. Along with her other counterparts; she celebrates her sacrifice and martyrdom. She enjoys every moment of her trial and execution like her wedding ceremony. She wishes to wear a red dress, a color of blood that earlier Afro- American women have shed in the struggle of freedom from the long prevailing shackles of racism and sexism. Basically, this is a kind of empowerment that men can never realize. Tashi's real empowerment is marked in her refusal to be blind folded during the moment of excursion, because she wants to die with her eyes open and looking at the sky; the symbol of her freedom. She wants to capture that moment of self-affirmation as eternity. In her empowerment Tashi gives spark to the fire existed in the bosoms of the long-suffering black women and leads them towards self-discovery by giving them the secret of resistance.

Conclusion: To conclude this research paper, it can be stated that through the presentation of the barbaric exoticism of such practices as clitoridectomy and infibulation, Walker makes us familiar with the real sufferings and unwillingness of their very victims, as narrated by themselves, although Walker's own voice and political stand are obviously behind them. For Walker, these rituals should not be seen merely as something exotic, but as a projection of the familiar Western male dominance and the white man's hunger for colonial conquest. Through these sexist rituals, the female Nature is penetrated, conquered, and manipulated. The white man colonizes the black man and in consequences the black man oppresses the black woman. Therefore, she is not only the victim of colonialism but also of patriarchy; so, she is the victim of the victim the slave of the slave. Here we

have studied that how this research paper has demonstrated the significant role that popular literature like Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, plays in raising awareness about Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Through its vivid portrayal of the physical and emotional trauma inflicted upon women who undergo FGM, Walker's novel amplifies the silenced voices of survivors and sheds light on the brutal realities of this practice. As a powerful tool for social commentary, these novel challenges societal norms and encourages readers to confront the harsh realities of FGM. By examining the novel through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theories, this study has highlighted the ways in which Walker's work subverts dominant discourses and promotes a nuanced understanding of the complex factors that contribute to FGM. As a testament to the transformative power of storytelling, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of literature on our understanding of the world and our capacity for empathy, compassion, and action. I have firm faith that after going through this research paper scholars will be aware about this heinous discrimination and will play their precious role in the eradication of FGM or any other such sexist discrimination to provide safe and healthy environment to our daughters, sisters, mothers and wives.

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